DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 613 SO 010 534

AUTHOR Long, Samuel
TITLE Political Reactance and Political Reality: A Theory of Political Alienation.
SPONS AGENCY Yale Univ., New Haven, Conn.
PUB DATE Sep 77
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (Chicago, Illinois, September 5-9, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Behavior; Black Attitudes; Data Analysis; High School Students; Literature Reviews; Majority Attitudes; *Negative Attitudes; *Political Attitudes; Psychological Patterns; Psychological Studies; Racial Factors; Secondary Education; Social Attitudes; Social Indicators; Social Influences; Social Science Research; *Student Alienation; *Student Attitudes; *Surveys; Tables (Data); *Theories

ABSTRACT

The research investigated political and psychological reactance among adolescents. Political reactance is interpreted to include feelings of political alienation and distrust. Psychological reactance is defined as behavior by an individual in response to reduction or threatened reduction of freedom. A model was created which expanded existing political reality models by adding a political threat component (degree to which real or perceived threat to one political freedom constitutes a threat to other political freedoms). It was hypothesized that (1) feelings of psychological reactance would correlate positively with feelings of political alienation and that (2) critical perceptions of political reality would correlate positively with feelings of alienation from the sociopolitical system. Survey data were collected from a random sample of 460 high school students in Evansville, Indiana, in May, 1975. Test instruments were devised to operationalize the political threat concept, to measure perceptions of political reality, and to assess feelings of political alienation. Findings, which confirmed the hypotheses, showed that perceptions of threat from the sociopolitical system were found to generate feelings of political alienation. The conclusion is that psychological reactance theory is one way of accounting for feelings of political alienation among adolescents. (Author/DB)

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POLITICAL REACTANCE AND POLITICAL REALITY:

A THEORY OF POLITICAL ALIENATION

Samuel Long

Political Psychology Program
Yale University

Prepared for delivery at the 1977 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Conrad Hilton Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, 5-9 September.

The assistance of the students, teachers, and administrators of the Evansville, Indiana Public School System in the completion of this research is gratefully acknowledged. Financial support for this research was provided by the Political Science Department and the Political Psychology Program, Yale University. Computer time was furnished by the Yale University Computer Center.

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Political Reactance and Political Reality: A Theory of Political Alienation

Two explanations have been proposed by Abramson (1972: 1243-1275) to account for feelings of political alienation among black preadults. The social deprivation model proposes that social deprivation leads to low levels of self-competence, which foster feelings of political inefficacy and political distrust; the political reality model suggests that blacks in the sociopolitical system are also aware of black interests being relatively unrepresented in the sociopolitical system, and, therefore, experience feelings of inefficacy and distrust.

Recent research on these two models indicates that although the social deprivation explanation lacks explanatory power, the political reality explanation provides considerable explanatory power in accounting for feelings of political inefficacy and distrust among both white and black adolescents (Rodgers, 1974; Long, 1975a; Long, 1976c; Long, 1976d; Long, 1976f; Long, 1977a; Long, 1978b). Unfortunately, the political reality explanation is devoid of a motivational component and, therefore, does not adequately account for perceptions of systemic functioning and feelings of political alienation. Furthermore, the model as discussed by Abramson is limited to black preadults; what is required is a theory which accounts for feelings of political alienation among both white and black preadults and adults.

Brehm's theory of psychological reactance would seem to furnish one means by which feelings of political alienation might be predicted among

diverse groups in the population. Basic to the theory of reactance is an assumption concerning the arousal properties of perceived loss of freedom: ". . . if a person's behavioral freedom is reduced or threatened with reduction, he will become motivationally aroused. This arousal will presumably be directed against any further loss of freedom and it would also be directed toward the re-establishment of whatever freedom has already been lost or threatened" (Brehm, 1966: 2). In addition, "the magnitude of reactance is a direct function of (1) the importance of the free behaviors which are eliminated or threatened, (2) the proportion of free behaviors eliminated or threatened, and (3) where there is only a threat of elimination of free behaviors, the magnitude of that threat" (Brehm, 1966: 4).

In applying psychological reactance theory to political behavior, two more points should be emphasized. First, freedom need not be actually threatened or reduced for the individual to experience psychological reactance. As Brehm writes, "if the observer believes he has the freedom that he sees threatened or eliminated for another, the more he feels he could be in the place of the other, the more reactance is aroused in him" (1972: 3). Thus, ". . .the observer must feel that he and the observed person are 'interchangeable'--that there are no differences in experience, status, power, and so on that imply that a threat to or elimination of the observed person's freedom does not apply to the observer's freedom" (Brehm, 1972: 3). Equally important is the assumption that a person generalizes from threatened or eliminated freedoms to similar freedoms, at other times, on other circumstances:

> When a person sees a threat to, or elimination of one of his freedoms, it is probably not unusual for him to infer that some of his other freedoms are also threatened. To the extent that he makes such an inference, the magnitude of reactance tends to be greater than what would occur from the original threat or elimination . . . . In general, a single threat or elimination of freedom can imply the loss of the same freedom on other occasions or the loss of similar behavioral freedoms in the same or other institutions (Brehm, 1972: 2-3).

In expanding the political reality model of political alienation, it follows that critical perceptions of political reality from the original version of the model would not only contribute to feelings of alienation from the sociopolitical system, but would also lead to feelings of psychological reactance, if such original feelings of reactance had been "politicized" either through direct experience or through observation, and if the operations and functioning of the sociopolitical system were intrinsically important to the individual. Finally, such feelings of psychological reactance should also contribute directly to feelings of political alienation on the individual's part. Thus, three hypotheses emerge for empirical test in this study:

H_1 Critical perceptions of political reality will correlate positively with feelings of psychological reactance.

H_2 Feelings of psychological reactance will correlate positively with feelings of political alienation.

H_3 Critical perceptions of political reality will correlate positively with feelings of political alienation.

Sample. Data for this research were gathered through the use of a written questionnaire, self-administered to a random sample of 460 senior

high school students in Evansville, Indiana in May, 1975. This sample was composed of 48 percent males and 52 percent females, of whom 91 percent were white and 9 percent were black. Fifteen percent of these students reported having grade-point-averages of A, 47 percent reported GPAs of B, and 38 percent reported GPAs of C or below. Thirty-one percent of their parents had less than twelve years of formal education, 38 percent were high school graduates, 12 percent had attended college, and 20 percent of their parents were college graduates.

Conceptual Indicators. Two scales were utilized in operationalizing the independent variable (Long, 1976e; Long, 1977c; Long, 1978c). The first of these, the political sensitivity scale, with a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.66, was constructed to measure psychological reactance thresholds: 1) If the government wouldn't allow newspapers to print whatever they wished, I would be very disturbed; 2) I would feel very threatened if the government prohibited me from reading certain books or watching certain television programs; 3) If the government wouldn't permit me to vote in elections, I would be very angry; 4) If the government denied me the right to live where I pleased, I don't think I'd be too concerned (Reflected); 5) I would be very upset if the government denied me the right of free speech; 6) I really don't think I'd be too concerned if the government made it illegal for people to criticize our political leaders (Reflected); 7) I can't imagine getting upset over not being permitted by the government to support a particular political party in an election (Reflected); 8) I would not be particularly disturbed if the government prohibited me from seeking certain kinds of employment (Reflected); and

9) I would feel very frustrated if the government wouldn't allow me to associate with or talk to certain people.

The political reactance scale, with a reliability coefficient of 0.70, was designed to measure perceptions of imminent political threat: 1) The way our leaders are running the country these days, I really feel threatened; 2) Sometimes I feel that the poor leadership we've had in this country recently is going to somehow threaten the kind of life I'd like to live; 3) I'm not going to be able to live the kind of life I'd like to live because of the way this country is being run; 4) I'm not as free to do some of the things I'd like to do because of the political situation in this country today; 5) I feel personally threatened when I hear how our government is managing the economy these days; 6) I really don't see how the government could influence my life in any way (Reflected); 7) I don't view the government as a threat to my personal freedom (Reflected); 8) With the recent wiretapping and spying activities of the government coming to light, it's obvious that the personal privacy of all of us is threatened; and 9) Because of the government's handling of our economy, a lot of students like me won't be able to get jobs when they graduate.

When corrected for attenuation, a correlation of 0.36 resulted between these two indicators of perceived political threat.

Felt political alienation, the dependent variable in this research, was operationalized using four attitudinal scales, exhibiting a mean interscale correlation of 0.62. The first of these indicators, Olsen's political incapability scale (1969: 288-299), measured feelings of political inefficacy: 1) I believe public officials don't care much what people like me and my parents think; 2) There is no way other than voting that

people like me and my parents can influence actions of the government; 3) Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that I can't really understand what's going on; and 4) People like me and my parents don't have any say about what the government does. A Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.49 was registered by this scale.

Olsen's political discontentment scale (1969: 288-299), exhibiting an Alpha coefficient of 0.58, was used to operationalize the policy discontentment concept: 1) As the government is now organized and operated, I think it is hopelessly incapable of dealing with all the crucial problems facing the country today; 2) It seems to me that the government often fails to take necessary actions on important matters, even when people favor such actions; 3) These days the government is trying to do too many things, including some activities that I don't think it has the right to do; and 4) For the most part, the government serves the interests of a few organized groups, such as business or labor, and isn't very concerned about the needs of people like my parents and me.

The third dimension of the political alienation concept was measured by means of the political cynicism scale of Agger, et al. (1961: 477-506), which attained a reliability coefficient of 0.50. Six items comprised this scale: 1) Money is the most important factor influencing public policies; 2) Politicians represent the general interest more frequently than they represent special interests (Reflected); 3) In order to get nominated, most candidates for political office have to make basic compromises and undesirable commitments; 4) Politicians spend most of their time getting reelected or reappointed; 5) People are very frequently manipulated by politicians; and 6) A large number of city and county politicians are political hacks.

The political estrangement scale (Long, 1975c; Long, 1978a; Long, 1978d), with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.64, was composed of the following items: 1) When I think about government and politics in the United States, I consider myself an outsider; 2) I tend to identify myself with and feel closely associated with American politics and government (Reflected); 3) When I hear or read about the politics and governmental system of the United States, I feel that I am a part of that system (Reflected); and 4) When I think about the government in Washington, I don't feel as if it's my government.

The "critical perceptions of political reality" concept was operationalized using three scales, manifesting an inter-scale correlation of 0.34. The first of these indicators, the perceived economic discrimination scale (Long, 1975b), attained a reliability coefficient of 0.65: 1) When they both commit the same crimes, poor people get longer sentences than rich people; 2) Political leaders take advantage of rich people more than they do poor people (Reflected); 3) Most laws treat the poor worse than the rich; 4) Businessmen cheat poor people more than they do rich people; and 5) Police treat poor people worse than rich people.

Five items comprised the perceived racial discrimination scale (Long, 1976b; Long, 1977b): 1) Businessmen cheat black people more than they do white people; 2) Most laws treat whites worse than blacks (Reflected); 3) Police treat blacks worse than whites; 4) When they both commit the same crimes, blacks get shorter sentences than whites (Reflected); and 5) Political leaders take advantage of white people more than they do black people (Reflected). This measure exhibited a reliability coefficient of 0.56.

Finally, the perceived democratic deficiency scale (Long, 1976a), with nine items, attained a reliability coefficient of 0.60: 1) People like me

probably believe in basic democratic principals more than our political leaders do; 2) This country is becoming less democratic every day; 3) It's very disturbing to me that the interests of some groups of people aren't fully represented in our political system; 4) Although our government is supposed to be based on justice for everyone, it really isn't just at all; 5) I regret very much that there isn't more racial equality in this country today; 6) No matter what the civics books say, all people are not treated politically equally; 7) I'm very much concerned about many people in this country today not having as much political equality as they should; 8) Personal liberty is something that's only written about in textbooks, not something that really exists in this country today; and 9) Although I wish it were otherwise, no one in this country today has as much freedom as the Constitution says they should have.

Results. Rather than relying on bivariate correlational analysis for hypothesis-testing in this study, canonical correlations will be employed in the initial phase of this analysis. Canonical analysis provides a means by which the major independent dimensions relating one set of variables to a second set of variables can be specified. Therefore, in this instance, canonical correlations will provide information regarding the number of ways in which the three sets of indicators used in this research are related to each other, the strengths of these various relationships, and the nature of these delineated associations (Cooley and Lohnes, 1971: 168-200).

The first hypothesis to be tested posits a positive association between the psychological reactance, or political threat, concept and the political

TABLE 1. CANONICAL CORRELATION ANALYSIS BETWEEN POLITICAL REALITY PERCEPTION AND POLITICAL THREAT VARIABLE SETS

Canonical Correlations

Canonical Variate Sets	Eigenvalues	Canonical Correlations	Wilk's Lambda	Chi Square	DF	P
1	0.31	0.56	0.67	151.45	6	0.0001
2	0.02	0.14	0.98	7.96	2	0.019

Canonical Coefficients

	Canonical Variate 1	Canonical Variate 2
Perceived Economic Discrimination	0.31	0.96
Perceived Racial Discrimination	-0.20	-0.21
Perceived Democratic Deficiency	0.83	-0.72
Political Sensitivity	0.19	1.02
Political Reactance	0.94	-0.43

reality perceptions concept. The canonical correlational analysis relevant to this hypothesis appears in Table 1. As the statistics in this table indicate, two independent dimensions result from this procedure, the first of which accounts for almost all the variance in the relationship, 31 percent, compared to only 2 percent on the second dimension. With a canonical correlation of 0.56 between the two variable sets on the first dimension, relatively strong support is provided for the first hypothesis. In addition, it is significant that the canonical coefficients show that the strongest relationship on this initial variable set occurs between the political reactance and perceived democratic deficiency measures. On this same dimension, it is noteworthy that perceptions of economic and racial discrimination exhibit less weight, and the latter variable possesses a negative sign. Finally, it is also of interest that the political sensitivity measure manifests a weight on this dimension approximately one-fifth of that manifested by the political reactance measure. While statistically significant, the second dimension to emerge from the canonical analysis accounts for so little variance that it is far less important than the first dimension in interpreting the hypothetical linkage between psychological reactance and political reality perceptions. The first hypothesis is confirmed.

According to the second hypothesis, feelings of psychological reactance should be expected to correlate positively with feelings of political alienation. The data in Table 2 indicate that, with a canonical correlation of 0.62 between the two variable sets, the second hypothesis is also confirmed. Interestingly, feelings of political reactance seem especially related to policy discontentment on this dimension. On the second dimension, however, accounting for 13 percent of the variance, a more complicated

TABLE 2. CANONICAL CORRELATION ANALYSIS BETWEEN POLITICAL REACTANCE AND POLITICAL ALIENATION VARIABLE SETS

Canonical Correlations

Canonical Variate Sets	Eigenvalues	Canonical Correlations	Walk's Lambda	Chi Square	DF	P
1	0.38	0.62	0.53	239.49	8	0.0001
2	0.13	0.36	0.87	53.20	3	0.0001

Canonical Coefficients

	Canonical Variate 1	Canonical Variate 2
Political Sensitivity	0.16	1.02
Political Reactance	0.95	-0.41
Political Inefficacy	0.08	-0.69
Policy Discontentment	0.68	0.01
Political Cynicism	0.39	0.72
Political Estrangement	0.09	-0.42

relationship results. In this latter case, political efficacy, political cynicism, and to a lesser degree political allegiance are associated with political sensitivity and a rejection of the imminent threat component. Again, however, the strongest association with the simplest structure provides comparatively strong support for the hypothesis.

Table 3 presents the canonical correlational analysis results pertinent to the third hypothesis, namely, that critical perceptions of political reality will correlate positively with feelings of political alienation. Relatively strong empirical support is accorded this hypothesis. As the table indicates, the two variable sets on the initial dimension exhibit a correlation of 0.62, and perceptions of democratic deficiencies appear to be most related to policy discontentment, and to a lesser extent with political cynicism. All three hypotheses have been supported using data from these Evansville, Indiana adolescents.

Equally important to this investigation is the testing of the hypothetical causal sequence suggested in the model of political alienation antecedents forwarded: critical perceptions of political reality generate both feelings of political threat and feelings of political alienation, while feelings of political threat also contribute to feeling of political alienation. This causal notion is tested through the use of path analysis (Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973: 305-331), the results of which appear in Figure 1. In this instance, composite additive indicators have been computed for each of the three concepts in the model. The path analytic results in Figure 1 support this hypothetical sequence. From a theoretical vantagepoint, it is of interest that feelings of political threat and critical perceptions of political reality exert equal influence on feelings of

TABLE 3. CANONICAL CORRELATION ANALYSIS BETWEEN POLITICAL REALITY PERCEPTION AND POLITICAL ALIENATION VARIABLE SETS

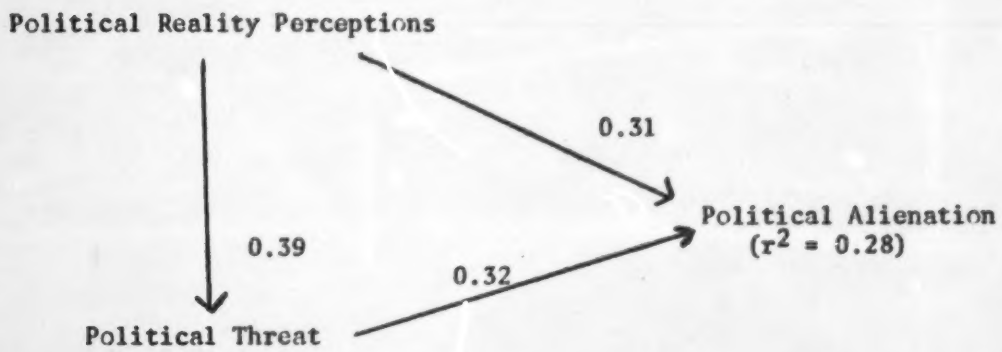
Canonical Correlations

Canonical Variate Sets	Eigenvalues	Canonical Correlations	Wilk's Lambda	Chi Square	DF	P
1	0.41	0.64	0.56	223.90	12	0.0001
2	0.05	0.22	0.94	22.94	6	0.0001

Canonical Coefficients

	Canonical Variate 1	Canonical Variate 2
Perceived Economic Discrimination	0.34	-1.03
Perceived Racial Discrimination	-0.17	-0.02
Perceived Democratic Deficiency	0.81	0.76
Political Inefficacy	0.06	0.23
Policy Discontentment	0.67	0.51
Political Cynicism	0.38	-1.04
Political Estrangement	0.14	0.39

FIGURE 1. PATH ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL REALITY-POLITICAL THREAT MODEL OF POLITICAL ALIENATION



NOTE: All betas are greater than twice their standard errors.

political alienation. It is also noteworthy that political reality perceptions have a slightly greater impact on felt political threat than they do on feelings of alienation. These path analysis results, in combination with the canonical correlation findings, yield consistent, relatively strong support for the model of political alienation antecedents proposed here.

The political reality model of political alienation originally discussed by Abramson dealt solely with black preadults. As has been suggested in this paper, this model may serve equally well in accounting for feelings of political alienation among white preadults as well (Long, 1976a; Long and McGlynn, 1977). If this is the case, then the possibility of multiple political realities, all of which engender felt political alienation, must be considered. If, for example, black and white groups are compared in this regard, it is likely that both may perceive systemic malfunctioning and discrimination, but from their rather selective perspectives. It is also possible that these different groups, possessing these diverse viewpoints, may also either fail to recognize or reject the other's perceptions of sociopolitical reality. This phenomenon may be particularly common where race provides the primary perceptual focus.

When separate canonical correlation analyses are executed for each racial group in this study, this multidimensional perceptual notion is supported. Thus, while the correlations are comparable for both racial groups, the political threat-political reality linkages differ, with political reactance being related to perceived democratic deficiencies for the white group and political reactance being related to both perceived democratic deficiencies and racial discrimination for the black group. Similarly, for whites, political reactance was associated with policy

discontentment; but, for blacks, political sensitivity was related to political cynicism. Finally, perceptions of democratic deficiencies and economic discrimination were correlated with policy discontent for white adolescents; but, for black adolescents, perceptions of racial and economic discrimination were linked to feelings of political inefficacy and political cynicism. In all cases, though, the strength of the correlations between the different variable sets was similar for both racial groups, and, furthermore, the causal sequence was not appreciably altered.

Conclusion. Psychological reactance theory has been employed here to account for the genesis of feelings of political alienation among white and black adolescents (Matthews and Prothro, 1966; Salamon and Van Evera, 1973; Kornberg, et al., 1970). The evidence from preadults in Evansville, Indiana collected in 1975 supports the model. Perceptions of threat from the socio-political system do appear to generate feelings of political alienation, particularly policy discontentment, and result from critical perceptions of political reality, especially regarding democratic deficiencies.

Psychological reactance theory might also be applied to the understanding of the consequences of political alienation among preadults, but there is some question as to its pertinence in this regard. The theory, for example, would predict that the more adolescents experience feelings of political reactance and alienation, the more they would be predisposed to participate in the political process and the more they would tend to value participative norms (Wicklund, 1974). It is questionable on both intuitive and experiential grounds whether this is, in fact, the case.

In contrast to the predictions of the reactance model, it would seem that contemporary preadults in the United States, in manifesting feelings of political alienation, particularly feelings of inefficacy and cynicism, are more prone to respond to the political sphere with either apathy and passivity or a more active rejection of the sociopolitical system and the values it symbolizes. What is being suggested here is that, while the psychological reactance model may be appropriate in predicting feelings of political alienation, a different model may be apropos in accounting for alienation consequences. One such formulation, the learned helplessness model, may be relevant in this respect (Seligman, 1975). According to this model, individuals' attempts at political participation following the inception of political reactance and political alienation may be dysfunctional and the individuals may exhibit a propensity for political passivity. And, too, the political arena will be either ignored or devalued. Finally, according to the learned helplessness model, the individual will come to generalize his feelings of political threat and alienation to all aspects of the sociopolitical system and to assume that the sociopolitical system cannot be controlled in any manner (Wortman and Brehm, 1975: 277-336). Thus, even when confronted with a situation in the sociopolitical context in which some control might be effected, this model suggests that the individual will typically not initiate such action or will initiate action which is inappropriate to the problem solution.

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